

“In the Middle” for God and Country— Ministry at Arlington National Cemetery

by CDR Lewis E. Brown, CHC, USNR



Introduction:

We pause each year on Memorial Day to remember all who have sacrificed their lives to keep our country “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” The holiday was originally known as Decoration Day and it was a time set aside to honor the nation’s Civil War dead by decorating their graves. During the first national celebration of Decoration Day, then-General James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery after which 5,000 participants decorated the graves of more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers.

At Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), the commemoration continues with an annual Memorial Day Joint Military Service in which a wreath is layed at the Tomb of the Unknowns. Memorial Day events are representative of the daily services that occur at ANC as chaplains of each branch of the Armed Forces join ceremonial honor guards in serving so that our veterans and their family members can be buried with honors in our nation’s most famous cemetery.

This article is about the ministry of Navy chaplains at Arlington to and with those who carry out these sacred duties.

Funerals at Arlington National Cemetery: An overview

You are visiting Arlington National Cemetery where you happen upon a full honors ceremony in progress. Along with the other tourists, you silently watch military members pass by in cadence: the band, the color guard, and marchers-in-arms. There is a noticeable gap, then the chaplain, and another gap. The flag-draped casket, resting atop the horse drawn caisson follows. Then come the mourners, some walking, and some in cars. Your attention returns to the solitary figure in the gap. The chaplain walks behind the military members, but in front of the deceased and the mourners. In this ceremony—our nation’s final act of thanks to



its veterans—the chaplain is “in the middle,” for God and country.

Navy chaplains who regularly assist at funerals in ANC are assigned to Naval District Washington, the Navy’s oldest shore base, and to Headquarters Battalion, Headquarters Marine Corps, Henderson Hall. Funerals are only one facet of the ministry provided by these chaplains. These are the reflections of one who has been “in the middle,” praying for those ahead, many of whom will go into harm’s way, and for those behind, who ask the Lord for mercy upon the deceased.

There are an average of 25 funerals each day at ANC. Funerals are held five days a week, 52 weeks a year. The exception is federal holidays. The Army conducts most of the funerals because most of the U.S. military has been Army. Most of the funerals are Protestant because the majority of our nation is Protestant. Military chaplains are assigned according to the branch of service and the faith group of the deceased. Ministry to the mourners is one of helpful, prayerful compassion. Chaplains help minimize the confusion by contacting family members in advance of the funeral date to express condolences and to discuss the rituals. When families do not bring their own ministers, assigned chaplains meet the families at the cemetery administration building before the ceremony, or if there is to be a chapel service, at the Old Post chapel at Fort Myer, which is adjacent to the cemetery.

Mourners come to ANC from around the country, indeed, from around the world. Most have experienced their grieving at home, and have been comforted by familiar pastoral care workers and funeral/memorial services at their local places of worship. They have come to ANC for final prayers and military honors. The impressiveness of the cemetery and the nobility of the ceremony are channels of blessing for them.

Sometimes the family has special prayers or a favorite poem they wish to be read. About ten percent of the families request a chapel service. We suggest scripture readings and urge family members or friends to do the readings. The chapel provides an organist who also is open to suggestions from the family. Family members will frequently prepare a bulletin with a picture and biography of the deceased, the order of service, and the words of a favorite hymn, most often "Eternal Father."

The families of officers may request a full honors ceremony. Enlisted members receive standard honors. Spouses, unmarried children up to age 21, or handicapped dependents of any age are buried with prayers, but no military honors. In attendance at the funeral of every Sailor is a volunteer who represents the Chief of Naval Operations—the Navy Arlington Lady. A member

A full honors ceremony involves at least 65 people, more for higher-ranking officers. A commander of troops flanked by a guide-on leads the ceremony. A drum major is next, conducting a 15-piece band. A four-member color guard marches ahead of the (one or more) 23-member marching platoon. The chaplain is sometimes accompanied by a flag-presenting officer when the deceased is of captain or higher rank. An Army sergeant oversees the three riders and six paired horses that draw the caisson. Six casket bearers march behind the caisson. Waiting at the gravesite is a seven-member firing party and head caller, a petty officer in charge, and the Arlington Lady with her escort.



of the Navy Ceremonial Guard escorts her. Each family is in the care of a cemetery representative (CR) who has been in phone contact, and now reviews the information that will be placed on the tombstone. If not already at the chapel, he invites the mourners to their cars, and then leads the hearse and cars to the transfer point, the gravesite or the columbarium.

If there has been a chapel service, the casket is placed on the caisson outside the chapel where the military formation begins the march to the gravesite. When there is no chapel service the deceased is brought to a place near the gravesite and transferred to the caisson. This allows some marching by the military, and walking by the mourners.

When all arrive at the gravesite, the chaplain leads the casket bearers and mourners to the grave. The flag is held unfolded over the deceased during prayers, after which the mourners stand for honors. There will be three volleys of seven shots from the firing party. Ideally, only three sharp cracks will be heard. The poignant sound of taps follows. The flag is folded into the familiar triangular shape and presented with the statement that begins: "On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation..." Each presenting officer completes the statement with



self-chosen words. The Arlington Lady presents a hand-written card of condolence to the next of kin. The chaplain bids farewell to the family, and the cemetery representative announces the conclusion of the ceremony.

Standard honors begin at the gravesite with the chaplain, casket bearers, firing party, petty officer in charge, a bugler, and the Arlington Lady with escort. Prayers are said, and honors rendered as described above. For dependents, the casket bearers bring the casket from the hearse to the grave, then leave. There are no military honors rendered after the chaplain prays.

Close to half of the funerals at ANC now involve cremation. According to the eligibility of the deceased, cremains are placed either in the columbarium or in the ground. Each court of the columbarium has over five thousand niches. Each niche has space for two adult urns. There are six courts currently in use with four more planned.

Future land acquisition, and another columbarium will provide additional room for veterans and their families, adding to the more than 280,000 who are now resting in peace in this splendid national monument.

U.S. Navy Ceremonial Guard

The Washington Navy Yard is called the “Ceremonial Quarterdeck of the Navy.” It is home base to the U. S. Navy Ceremonial Guard (CG)—180 male and female Sailors straight out of boot camp, with a leadership and support staff of

about 45. Since 1931, the CG’s primary mission is to represent the Navy in presidential, Joint Armed Forces, Navy and public ceremonies in the nation’s capital. You may see them “live” or on television in Joint Armed Forces color guards and cordons, state funerals, presidential inaugurations, full honors arrival ceremonies at the Pentagon, wreath-layings, the “Navy presence” at state arrivals, dinners and receptions, and final honors at every Navy funeral at ANC. They are called upon to carry the colors at various local gatherings as well as major social and sporting events around the country.



Ministry to the Guardsmen and staff is what you would do anywhere aboard ship or ashore—a lot of deckplate ministry to these Gen Y junior Sailors, Gen X junior officers and petty officers, and Boomer chiefs and senior officers. Chaplains meet with them individually, in passing or with appointments; collectively in indoctrination briefs, training sessions, quarters, just before parades and, at ANC, prior to funerals. They look for help in finding meaning in what they are doing, in untangling the complications of life, in soothing bruises from personal or work relationships. They seek to grow in their Navy career, relations with others, and life.



As the one “in the middle,” chaplains have many opportunities to understand and counsel the anxious, to interpret their struggles of leadership, to invite all to grow in faith. We provide Bible studies as well as daily and Sunday worship services. There is also the opportunity to support naval enculturation. Many Sailors of all generations and ranks are unaware of such things as the history and meaning of the “crow,” the “fouled anchor,” “shift colors” and “wetting down.” We use the “Chaplains’ Corner” in the base newspaper as a vehicle to connect the Scriptures with Navy traditions. Involvement with community relations projects is another positive way to encourage and be with our Sailors.

Every three months, the CG leadership travels to Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes, where they show a “way cool” video invitation to join the CG. Twenty-five volunteers will be selected who meet such criteria as minimum height (6 feet for males and 5 feet 10 inches for females), glasses-free (contacts are okay), good moral character and military bearing, physically fit and court-conviction free. Assignment to the CG is for two years, followed by a guaranteed choice of “A” school before being transferred to the fleet. New Guard members experience an 11-week training program conducted by current members. Upon successful completion of training, they may request permanent placement as casket bearers, firing party, marching platoon, drill team or color guard.

When the Guardsmen assume their new tasks, the ministry of the chaplain takes on a new phase. Like TV’s Detective Columbo, the chaplain always has one more question as a follow up to, “Sailor, tell me about your new job!” I have learned many things from these young Sailors just by asking questions about what they do. There is much knowledge to be gained when the chaplain expresses interest.

United States Navy Band

Interest and appreciation are also key to ministering to the members of the U.S. Navy Band, based at the Washington Navy Yard since 1925. Currently there are over 170 band members who have been selected for their musical proficiency and enlisted in the Navy. They work in seven performing units: ceremonial, concert, jazz, chamber, country, pop, and a vocal group.



For ANC funerals, a ceremonial group consists of 15 members, 18 if the deceased was a flag officer. These musicians are led by a drum major whose mace is often personally designed. For full honors ceremonies, the band selects from eight hymns according to the faith group of the deceased. During the journey to the gravesite, they select from ten marches, among them, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” or “God of our Fathers.” When the casket is carried from caisson to grave, they play “Eternal Father,” and after taps, lately, “America the Beautiful.” The Navy Band also plays for U.S. Coast Guard funerals, while the Marine Corps has its own band and buglers.

Trumpeters from the Navy Band consider being the bugler a position of honor. They will tell you, “Playing taps is the most important thing we do.” I



have learned from the buglers that taps is always played in the key of B flat.

Members of the Band are professionals in their field. They represent the Navy at venues around the country. While most will spend their entire

Navy career at the Navy Yard, some, to experience the adventure of the Navy, request assignment to the Fleet Band where they will be regularly reassigned to band units around the world.

“Arlington Ladies”

In 1948, Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg was living at Fort Myer, Virginia, in a home with a commanding view of the cemetery. He and his wife, Gladys, often walked there, and noticed airmen being buried with only the chaplain and an honor guard in attendance. The general stated that his service's members would never have “a bleak and friendless funeral.” He and his wife began attending funerals for Air Force members. In a short time, a number of Air Force wives joined them. So constant was their presence, and so positive their impact, that they received the nickname, “The Arlington Ladies.”

There are now about 150 volunteers representing the Army, Navy and Air Force at the funeral of each veteran—and sometimes of the spouse or other dependent. Some are spouses of active duty or retired military members, some are widows, some are mothers of present or former service personnel, and some are veterans themselves. Their heart-felt mission is to comfort the mourners, pray for the dead, and honor our nation's veterans.

Arlington Ladies travel from near and far to ANC where they hand write a letter of condolence and an offer of help to each bereaved family. They meet the family before the ceremony, and are escorted to the gravesite by a member of the CG. Following the prayers and presentation of the flag, the Arlington Lady presents her letter and best wishes to the next of kin. Sometimes they will write a long letter describing the ceremony, its participants, and even the weather to a family member who couldn't attend. At a family's request, the Arlington Lady will lay a wreath on a veteran's grave on special days.

The Arlington Ladies complement the chaplain's work at ANC. Their care for the mourners, their respect for the ceremony, unobtrusive presence, and their quiet prayerfulness is exemplary. Ministry with them is enjoyable. The rewards are sumptuous, for they are all good cooks who don't forget the kindness of their chaplains! Nor do they

forget the steady arm that escorts them. A volunteer member from the Navy CG is appointed and escorts the Arlington Lady to every funeral of a Navy veteran. Separated from the daily routine of other members of the CG, he has the challenge of maintaining good relationships with his peers. Sharing the Arlington Lady's homemade confections goes a long way to support that effort, too.

ANC Administration Staff and Cemetery Representatives

The Veterans Administration is responsible for over 100 national cemeteries throughout our country. But the Department of the Army administers ANC, where more restrictive in-ground burial regulations will keep ANC an active cemetery for as long as possible. The Ceremonial Guard for the Army is from the 3d Infantry, “The Old Guard.” These soldiers stand watch at the Tomb of the Unknowns 24 hours every day of the year. They participate in Army funerals, as do their counterparts in the other branches of the military services. They have the added responsibility of maintaining the horses and caissons for full honors funerals. In preparation for Memorial Day, they place an American flag in front of every tombstone and at the base of every column of niches in the columbarium. Under their guidance, civilian maintenance personnel take meticulous care of



the grounds. They align tombstones the old-fashioned way: with string. But they use the modern technology of the global positioning system to locate every tree in the cemetery.

At the administration center, Interment Services clerks work five and a half days a week responding to calls about eligibility, scheduling funerals and answering questions for families in their time of sorrow and stress. Human Resources personnel keep track of the employees, while financial experts keep track of expenses. The Superintendent and his boss from the Department of the Army take operational costs and plans directly to the U. S. Congress.

The cemetery representatives work directly with the veterans' families. Each deals with as many as six different families each day. They counsel the families before the day of the funeral and lead them to and through the ceremony on the day of the funeral. The chaplain takes his cues from the cemetery representative—insights into the needs of the family, the location of the gravesite, or



possible delays. The cemetery representative interprets policy and procedure, and will review the ceremony should things go awry. The cemetery representative “orchestrates;” all others, including the chaplain, play their designated part.

Downstairs, in the administration center, are offices and working spaces for the Army, Navy and Air Force. Chaplains, civilian secretaries, the Arlington Ladies and escorts of each branch work here. Secretaries receive decedent information forms and pass them to the chaplains according to the branch and faith group of the deceased. Schedules are circulated for all. Military members don their ceremonial, seasonal, wrinkle-free uniforms with attachments properly polished and placed.

Ministry to these civilian and military workers is one of thoughtful cooperation. Life goes on for these folks: arrivals and departures, weddings of the young, grandchildren for the older, and birthdays for all. Stand by for invitations, pictures, and potluck meals. With the chaplains of the other branches there is wonderful fellowship, storytelling, and the swapping of materials to enrich ministry to the bereaved.

Summary: Our Nation Gives Thanks

Our nation makes a major commitment in the way it expresses gratitude to its veterans. Space, time and personnel are set aside for this honor. The ministry of chaplains assigned for funerals at Arlington National Cemetery touches more than just the mourners. Many military and civilian personnel benefit from the one who marches “in the middle,” for God and Country.

For more information consult, these websites:

www.arlingtoncemetery.com

www.navyband.navy.mil

*Chaplain Lew Brown serves
Naval District Washington.
His office is at Naval Station
Anacostia.*

